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local

What's next for the system?

Panel explores future of criminal justice under Gov. Spitzer

by amy zimmer / metro new york

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FEB 16, 2007

THE NEW SCHOOL. There are currently 63,500 inmates in New York's state prison. While that's down 8,100 from the peak in 1999, criminal justice advocates believe changes to the system could lower that number even further, and they're hopeful Gov. Eliot Spitzer will take the state in that direction.

Spitzer's proposals to re-examine the state's \$3 billion criminal justice system include setting up commissions to study possible prison closures — a similar task force recently recommended several hospital closures — and to re-examine prison sentences.

"The sentencing commission is going to look at every law on the book, including the Rockefeller Drug Laws," said Brian Fischer, acting commissioner of the New York State Department of Correctional Services, at a panel discussion held here yesterday co-sponsored by the Correctional Association of New York. The administration also plans to focus on better preparing inmates for re-entry into society. The panel hopes they also focus on eliminating waste, inhumanity and racism from the system.

Last year 26,000 inmates were released. Roughly 38 percent, however, end up back in prison within three years, mostly because of parole violations and the difficulty they have finding employment, housing, staying off drugs and "the lack of support they get when returning to communities," Fischer said.

"When they look for a job or a house or a license many are being denied because of our own public policies," he acknowledged.

He called for strengthening the relationship between the prisons, parole and community agencies to help former prisoners.

"You can imagine, instead of sending 8,000 [prisoners] back a year, if we sent 4,000 or 2,000 — these are real budget savings that translate into empty prison beds," said Michael Jacobson, director of the

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Vera Institute of Justice. “If fewer people come back, we’ll take a piece of that and reinvest in community programs or in-prison programs that can lower prison populations in the future.”

Jacobson acknowledged it would be a tough sell for the public.

“People say, ‘I’m a taxpaying citizen. You want my taxpayer dollars to pay for someone in prison to get an education?,’” Jacobson said. “The answer is ‘Yes, it’s in your self-interest.’”

Who's inside

- 36,212 are there for violent crimes; average prison time is a little more than six years.
- 13,928 for drug-related offenses; average prison time is a little less than three years.
- More than 8,000 have mental health problems.
- 48 percent are African American; 26 percent are Hispanic; 24 percent are white.



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